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Defining Bullshit

A philosophy professor says it's a process, not a product.

By Timothy Noah

Posted Wednesday, March 2, 2005, at 7:37 PM ET

"We live in an era of unprecedented bullshit production," observes Laura Penny, author of the forthcoming (and wittily titled) [Your Call Is Important to Us: The Truth About Bullshit](#). But what is bullshit, exactly? By which I mean: What are its defining characteristics? What is its Platonic essence? How does bullshit differ from such precursors as humbug, poppycock, tommyrot, hooley, twaddle, balderdash, claptrap, palaver, hogwash, buncombe (or "bunk"), hokum, drivel, flapdoodle, bullpucky, and all the other pejoratives* favored by H.L. Mencken and his many imitators? The scholar who answers the question, "What is bullshit?" bids boldly to define the spirit of the present age.

Enter Harry G. Frankfurt. In the fall 1986 issue of *Raritan*, Frankfurt, a retired professor of philosophy at Princeton, took a whack at it in an essay titled "On Bullshit." Frankfurt reprinted the essay two years later in his book [The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays](#). Last month he republished it a second time as a very small [book](#). Frankfurt's conclusion, which I caught up with in its latest repackaging, is that bullshit is defined not so much by the *end product* as by the *process* by which it is created.

Eureka! Frankfurt's definition is one of those not-at-all-obvious insights that become blindingly obvious the moment they are expressed. Although Frankfurt doesn't point this out, it immediately occurred to me upon closing his book that the word "bullshit" is both noun and verb, and that this duality distinguishes bullshit not only from the aforementioned Menckenesque antecedents, but also from its contemporary near-relative, horseshit. It is possible to bullshit somebody, but it is not possible to poppycock, or to twaddle, or to horseshit anyone. When we speak of bullshit, then, we speak, implicitly, of the action that brought the bullshit into being: Somebody bullshitted. In this respect the word "bullshit" is identical to the word "lie," for when we speak of a lie we speak, implicitly, of the action that brought the lie into being: Somebody lied.

Is "bullshit," then, a synonym for "lie"? Not exactly. Frankfurt asks us to consider an anecdote told about Ludwig Wittgenstein wherein the great philosopher phones a friend named Fania Pascal who's just had her tonsils removed. How are you, Wittgenstein asks. Like a dog that's been run over, Pascal answers. Wittgenstein then replies testily, "You don't know what a dog that has been run over feels like." In effect, Frankfurt argues, Wittgenstein is suggesting that Pascal is spouting bullshit. (A more reasonable person, Frankfurt concedes, would reach the charitable conclusion that Wittgenstein's friend is merely expressing herself through the use of allusive or at worst hyperbolic language.) Wittgenstein's grumpy outburst seems so absurd that very possibly the real bullshit here is the anecdote itself. But Frankfurt asks us to assume, for the purposes of this discussion, that the anecdote is true and that Wittgenstein's objection is rational and sincere.

So: Wittgenstein thinks Pascal is bullshitting him. But why, Frankfurt asks,

does it strike [Wittgenstein] that way? It does so, I believe, because he perceives what Pascal says as being—roughly speaking, for now—unconnected to a concern with the truth. Her statement is not germane to the enterprise of describing reality. She does not even think she knows, except in the vaguest way, how a run-over dog feels. Her description of her own feeling is, accordingly, something that she is merely making up.

Is Pascal lying? No. She isn't trying to deceive Wittgenstein about how she really feels, and she isn't trying to deceive Wittgenstein about how a dog would feel if run over. Her error, Frankfurt concludes, isn't that she conducted a faulty inquiry into how a dog would feel if run over, but that she conducted no inquiry at all (in this case, because none is possible). "It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as the essence of bullshit."

Frankfurt's definition is provocative because it allows for the little-recognized possibility that bullshit can be substantively true, and still *be bullshit*. Last summer, the *Financial Times* reported on evidence that the infamous war-justifying "16 words" in President Bush's 2003 [State of the Union address](#) ("The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa") [may have been true after all](#). Previously, a consensus had dismissed the Bush administration's charge that Iraq had sought to buy yellowcake from Niger (implicit in Bush's use of the word "learned" rather than "concluded") as outright bullshit—a lie, even. Did the *FT's* stories mean that the 16 words might *not* be bullshit? No. They meant the 16 words might

be true, but still didn't legitimize the shoddy White House research that had led to their inclusion in the speech. When those words were written into the speech, the president and his staff lacked the evidence needed to support them. They were bullshitting. The 16 words therefore remain bullshit, and will continue to remain bullshit even if the charge is eventually proved true.

More often, of course, bullshit is not true, in the same sense that a stopped clock is wrong 1,438 out of 1,440 minutes per day. Is bullshit as bad as a lie? Frankfurt thinks it's worse:

Both in lying and in telling the truth people are guided by their beliefs concerning the way things are. These guide them as they endeavor either to describe the world correctly or to describe it deceitfully. For this reason, telling lies does not tend to unfit a person for telling the truth in the same way that bullshitting tends to. ...The bullshitter ignores these demands altogether. He does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.

Bullshit, Frankfurt notes, is an inevitable byproduct of public life, "where people are frequently impelled—whether by their own propensities or by the demands of others—to speak extensively about matters of which they are to some degree ignorant." But politics is not a creation of the modern era; it's been around for centuries.

Why should bullshit be so prevalent now? The obvious answer is the communications revolution. Cable television and the Internet have created an unending demand for information, and there simply isn't enough truth to go around. So, we get bullshit instead. Indeed, there are some troubling signs that the consumer has come to *prefer* bullshit. In choosing guests to appear on cable news, bookers will almost always choose a glib ignoramus over an expert who can't talk in clipped sentences. In his [underappreciated](#) book *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*, Richard Posner found a negative correlation between media mentions and scholarly citations for the 100 public intellectuals most mentioned in the media—and these 100 accounted for 67.5 percent of all media mentions!

The Bush administration is clearly more bullshit-heavy than its predecessors. *Slate's* founding editor, Michael Kinsley, [put his finger on](#) the Bush administration's particular style of lying three years ago:

If the truth was too precious to waste on politics for Bush I and a challenge to overcome for Clinton, for our current George Bush it is simply boring and uncool. Bush II administration lies are often so laughably obvious that you wonder why they bother. Until you realize: They haven't bothered.

But by Frankfurt's lights, what Bush does isn't lying at all. It's bullshitting. Whatever you choose to call it, Bush's indifference to the truth is indeed more troubling, in many ways, than what Frankfurt calls "lying" would be. Richard Nixon *knew* he was bombing Cambodia. Does George W. Bush have a clue that his Social Security arithmetic fails to add up? How can he know if he doesn't care?

Correction, March 4, 2005: *An earlier version of this article mistakenly described these words as adjectives. In fact, they are nouns. [Return](#) to the corrected sentence.*

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Article URL: <http://www.slate.com/id/2114268/>

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